



1 000 Young Voices Survey

Summarised Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND OF THE SURVEY	02.
EXPLORING WHAT IS ALREADY AVAILABLE: A sneak peek into books, readings and articles on learner perspectives of school	02.
Mental Health	02.
Learner Perceptions of School Leadership	03.
Learner Perceptions of the Future	04.
Emerging Gaps	04.
Implications	04.
METHODOLOGY: tools to collect information about the perception of learners on teaching and learning	04.
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW ANALYSIS	05.
SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS	05.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS	07.
CONCLUSION	07.
REFERENCE LIST	08.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The successful completion of this research project was made possible through the extraordinary contributions of numerous persons and organizations, and we extend our sincere gratitude to every one of them. Foremost, we extend our deepest appreciation to Old Mutual, our valued and major funder, whose continuous support played a key role in making this research endeavour feasible. The financial backing offered by Old Mutual considerably helped to the implementation and success of our initiative, showcasing their dedication to furthering relevant research and knowledge.

Additionally, we recognize the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) for their significant assistance in the data collection process. Their involvement considerably boosted the depth and quality of our study findings, showing the relevance of teamwork for research initiatives. Furthermore, we thank the diligent research team, under the leadership of Hlengani Baloyi, for their tireless work. The team, consisting of Khuthadzo Magaza, Aluwani Mathoma, Carlfonta Malatji, Weltious Tshuma, Tshimangadzo Mudau, and Sifiso Dlamini as research assistants, played a significant part in the rigorous design, execution, and analysis of the research, assuring its overall success.

We also extend our appreciation to the NECT Project Management Team, especially Cebisa Ncube, Joshua Bell, Fortune Chauke, Lehlohonolo Malope, Thabang Mamaila, Precious Mokgohloa and Ntongolozzi Bembe. Their attentive oversight and good coordination were important in driving the project towards its aims, helping to the seamless implementation of the research. In expressing our gratitude, we acknowledge the vital role performed by each business and individual, acknowledging that their joint efforts were integral to the success of this research project.

BACKGROUND OF THE SURVEY

The 1000 Young Voices survey, funded by Old Mutual, was launched with the primary objective of gaining valuable insights into the experiences of Grade 9 and Grade 11 learners in South African schools. This comprehensive survey aimed to capture the perspectives of learners from all nine provinces, providing a holistic view of their schooling experiences. The primary aim of this survey was to assess learners' perceptions regarding their school experiences, the quality of leadership in their schools, and their outlook on the future of South Africa. The goal is to use this information to develop individualised programmes that address the specific requirements of learners. In addition, the initiative plans to conduct follow-up surveys to track learner progress over time.

Recognising the significance of youth participation in education, the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) involved the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) to take part in the data collection processes of this survey. The primary aims and objectives of the survey include comprehending students' mental health, their perceptions of the school environment and school leadership, and their future aspirations. These objectives are further subdivided into specific sub-focus areas, allowing for a thorough examination of critical factors affecting South African learners. A visual representation of survey objectives can be seen below.

Gain a better understanding of learner perceptions of school.

Understand the forms of learning and psychosocial support available to learners at school and at home.

Measure levels of optimism about their future and their recommendations for improving youth support.

EXPLORING WHAT IS ALREADY AVAILABLE: A SNEAK PEEK INTO BOOKS, READINGS AND ARTICLES ON LEARNER PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL

The literature review in this study focuses on the three areas of focus of the current study, namely, the mental health of learners, learner perceptions about the school environment and leadership, and learner perceptions of their futures. The literature review is therefore organised in line with these three identified areas, with a special focus on trends emerging from each focus area. This is followed by a reflection on emerging gaps and implications of emerging trends.

Mental Health

The World Health Organization (2018) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which an individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to his or her community. This section is packaged according to the themes hereunder that emerged from the reviewed literature.

Mental and emotional health of learners post-COVID-19 pandemic

Although the focus of this study is not necessarily on mental health issues in relation to the impact of the past COVID-19 pandemic, but because the pandemic has had an indelible impact on almost every sphere of life, it is almost impossible to discuss learners' mental health issues today without mentioning it. As Jansen (2020) correctly observes, there is a direct connection between the emotional states of children and their ability to learn. Jansen (2020) underscores the fact that the emotional costs of learning under protracted lockdown conditions are often invisible.

As studies on the impact of COVID-19 reveal, a wide range of emotions about 'lockdown learning' emerged amongst learners, including the emotions of sadness, hopelessness, anxiety, fear, loneliness, boredom and trauma caused by the tragic death of family members owing to the COVID-19 pandemic (Luthar et al., 2021;

Jansen, 2020). In line with these findings, Soland et al. (2020) insist that it is quite likely that following a pandemic such as COVID-19, there will be increases in anxiety and depression, substance abuse, loneliness, domestic violence and child abuse.

Contribution of risky behaviours to learners' mental health issues

Also emerging from the reviewed literature was the fact that risky behaviours such as alcohol and substance abuse and engaging in unsafe sexual behaviours amongst young people of school-going age contributed to their mental health issues (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020; Mfidi, 2017; Goodyear-Smith et al., 2017; Reddy et al., 2007). These risky behaviours render learners vulnerable to dangers – such as sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infections and teenage pregnancies – which have a disruptive effect on academic performance and mental well-being (World Health Organization, 2021; Mfidi, 2017). In fact, Schulte-Korne (2016) argues that mental health challenges of this nature increase the risk of repeating a grade, truancy and dropping out of school.

Lack of strategies to deal with mental health issues in schools.

The reviewed body of literature reveals a general lack of strategies or under-capacity necessary for dealing with mental health issues of young people in schools (McCance-Katz, 2019; Mfidi, 2017). As a result, many teachers are uncertain about how to deal with children with mental health issues, including, for instance, learners with hyperkinetic disorders (Schulte-Korne, 2016). It is for that reason that the Human Rights Commission of South Africa has recommended that the Department of Basic Education, in conjunction with the Department of Health, formulate a plan for introducing consistent mental health awareness-raising efforts aimed at educators; indicating how educators will provide accurate.

information about mental health conditions, promote mental health, assist learners in information about mental health conditions, promote mental health, assist learners in

identifying mental health conditions and obtaining the necessary assistance to help learners build skills that promote mental health and prevent suicide (South African Human Rights Commission, 2019). Research also shows low number of young people who visit mental health facilities to seek help on mental issues in South Africa. In 2019, for instance, only about 6% of children below the age of 18 years visited a mental health facility (StatsSA, 2022).

Resilience of learners despite challenges

Literature shows that despite all the challenges facing young people in South Africa, especially learners, learners show some level of resilience (Luthar et al.2021; Jansen, 2020; Brammer, 2020). The good academic performance of Grade 12 learners in the pandemic years, for instance, could attest to that observation. But the key question is this: How do learners and young people in general cope with the whole range of challenges they face? A few coping mechanisms were employed by learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, including religious faith and support from family members, friends and mentors (Theron, 2017; Jansen, 2020).

In a study that focused partly on explaining what enables the resilience of South Africa's young people in the face of numerous socio-economic challenges, Theron (2017) identifies the following key enablers: individual-level resources such as personal strengths; and systemic support such as supportive families and peers, faith-based support, mental health, criminal justice services and education. Additional enablers include hope – for future dreams (Goodman et al., 2017); relationships (Maholmes, 2014); and family communities (Theron, 2016). Theron (2017) advises that if societies wish to champion young people's resilience in optimal ways, then

young people's insights should be central to how resilience is promoted. And that is exactly what this study sought to do.

Learner Perceptions of School Leadership According to Hogan and Judge (2013), leadership (in the context of a school setting) cannot be defined only in individual terms as it involves

followers and groups, and its success depends on the organisation to achieve the collaborative purpose. Heystek (2022:128) concurs, positing that "it is not the success of individuals but the success of individuals in relation to their followers and the organisation which defines leadership". It is within this context that school leadership in this review should be understood.

Learner perceptions of school leadership and governance matters are crucial. It is for that reason that section 11(1) of the South African Schools Act, 108 of 1996 prescribes the establishment of representative councils of learners (RCL) in all public schools that enrol learners in Grade 8 and higher. In addition, section 23(2) prescribes the inclusion of learners in the membership of school governing bodies of schools that serve learners from Grade 8 and higher. As argued by Mafora (2013) learners (and teachers) who feel marginalised and dehumanised by school leadership suffer psychological damage that poses a threat to the stability and management effectiveness of schools. The themes discussed below emerged from the reviewed literature relevant to learner perceptions of school leadership.

Traits that contribute to outstanding school leadership

Several traits or qualities emerged from the reviewed literature as responsible for contributing to outstanding school leadership. According to the study by Getz and Roy (2013), learners perceived charismatic or value-based, team-oriented, participative and humane-oriented types of leadership as traits that contribute to outstanding school leadership. Focusing specifically on high-poverty schools and how they deal with

leadership challenges, Kamper (2008) identifies invitational leadership as crucial to outstanding school leadership. Although the focus was on primary schools, a study by Khumalo (2019) found that school principals who adopt the transformational leadership practice motivate their school principals who adopt the transformational leadership practice motivate their teachers towards commitment and thereby contribute towards sustainable development. Odhimbo and

Hii (2012), in their study focusing on stakeholder (teachers, parents, and learners) perceptions of effective school leadership, identify the following as key qualities of an effective school principal: the school principal's use of administrative powers; the responsibility to ensure quality teaching and learning; and the ability to develop relational leadership within the school community.

Traits of outstanding school leadership

In addition to qualities that contribute to outstanding leadership, as discussed above, the reviewed literature also revealed traits that inhibit outstanding leadership. Autonomous and self-protective types of leadership emerged as some of the traits (Getz & Roy, 2013). Heystek (2022) identifies some interesting additional leadership characteristics that inhibit outstanding school leadership, including school principals' failure to treat staff members (and presumably, learners) equally and school principals being too strict and autocratic. In addition, the reviewed literature reveals a range of general educational challenges that also inhibit outstanding school leadership. These include teacher absenteeism (DBE, 2019), learner absenteeism (DBE, 2018), poor facilities and insufficient funding (Heystek, 2022). Despite these challenges, most school principals exhibited self-efficacy and resilience as personal resources, which carried them through challenging circumstances both inside and outside the schools while retaining positivity (Heystek, 2022).

Challenges of social justice and transformational agendas in school leadership

The reviewed literature also shows the importance and positive effect that social justice and a transformational agenda have on school leadership. Research shows that social justice and transformational leadership form the basis of the framework through which school leadership is analysed (Jwan & Kisaka, 2017; Mafora, 2013). Social justice constitutes a fair and just distribution of resources, respect and opportunities, as well as the eradication of social patterns of exploitation, domination a

and DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) contend that social justice school leaders proactively ensure that all their learners thrive, even under unfavourable and challenging conditions.

According to Mafora (2013), the following key elements constitute social justice: it is a proactive endeavour or action; it is based on democratic values and principles; it focuses on upholding human rights; and it must benefit people who are marginalised. This is what the democratic government of South Africa set to achieve through its transformative agenda of the country's schooling system.

The question is this, then: How far has South Africa gone in achieving that noble objective? The findings of a study by Mafora (2013), focusing on learners' and teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership in Soweto secondary schools, answers this question. The study findings suggest that the respondents perceived schools as democratically untransformed within an environment fraught with unfairness, inequity, disregard for human rights and intolerance of diversity; while the leadership behaviour of principals was perceived as a barrier to democratic transformation and social justice, creating resistance and threatening management effectiveness (Mafora, 2013).

In response to the social justice challenges as mentioned above, Cambrone-McCabe and McCarthy (2005) suggest that social justice issues, especially

principles of organisational justice, should be incorporated into the initial teacher training curriculum and continuous professional development of principals. In addition, Mafora (2013) suggests the following improvement strategies: school principals should have clear standards of fairness and implement them consistently in the leadership of their schools; a commitment to social justice in schools should be encouraged through the formulation and adoption of policies and charters on social justice; and social justice should be one of the key performance areas (KPA) of school principals for which they should be held accountable. Shaked (2019) agrees:

principals for which they should be held accountable. Shaked (2019) agrees: practical approaches to developing social justice school leaders are still required.

Learner Perceptions of the Future

Young people's views, hopes and fears regarding the future are essential in defining the developmental agenda of young people for years and decades to come (De Melo, 2015). This section reviews literature that explores the perspectives of young people regarding their current lives in South Africa and their perspectives on their future in South Africa.

Benefits of living in South Africa

Some of the advantages of living in South Africa, according to young people, include ecological and sport features, human relations, freedom of speech and human rights, work opportunities, economic prospects and beautiful scenery (Berg & Scharf, 2004). A study by Kamper and Badenhorst (2010) also confirmed young people's happiness about South Africa's social aspects, such as human relations, freedom of speech and human rights. Interestingly, the findings of this study showed that young people are strongly positive, and mostly locally oriented, expressing some general optimism that life in future South Africa will be good (Kamper & Badenhorst, 2010).

Challenges of living in South Africa

Some of the social problems that trouble South African young people include the incidence of crime, violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS (Steyn et al., 2010). Research shows that crime has indeed become a noteworthy emigration factor (Berg & Scharf, 2004). Young people also mention the following as key challenges they must contend with in South Africa: HIV/AIDS, poverty, unemployment, violent crime, gangsterism and abuse of women and children (Steyn et al., 2010). In concurrence, Ferreira and Carbonatto (2020) also raise the following reasons for young people to express dissatisfaction with life in South Africa and eventually emigrate to other countries: political instability, violent crime and youth unemployment. Nevertheless, Steyn et al. (2010) suggest that learners' views on South Africa and



Africa and eventually emigrate to other countries: political instability, violent crime and youth unemployment. Nevertheless, Steyn et al. (2010) suggest that learners' views on South Africa and their future in this regard were primarily driven by personal ambitions.

Effects of COVID-19 on young people

A study by Gittings et al. (2021) reveals the following as several effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of young people: food insecurity, lost livelihoods, changes to social service provisions such as municipal electricity services and sanitation, and psychosocial stressors related to uncertainty over education and work futures. But most importantly, the study demonstrates how the indirect effects of COVID-19 may aggravate underlying multi-layered vulnerabilities for young people living in environments which are unsafe and constraining (Gittings et al., 2021).

Perspectives of the future in South Africa

In so far as learners' perspectives of their future in South Africa are concerned, the reviewed literature shows that, despite the societal challenges with which they must grapple, the youths of South Africa feel excited about the future in their home country. There is some level of hope and belief that these trying circumstances will eventually change for the better (Steyn et al., 2010). Literature also reveals a general spirit of optimism and independence amongst South African adolescents, despite the prevalence of societal challenges such as poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS and violent crime (Steyn et al., 2010). In addition, the reviewed literature shows that the new emerging generation of South Africans is characterised by a non-racial view of life and future expectations (Steyn et al., 2010).

It is important to underscore the fact that these were perspectives recorded some years ago and things may have changed since then. For instance, a recent study conducted by the Social Research Foundation, as reported in Times Live of 16 September 2022, indicates that 53% of university graduates and 43% of those who earn more than R20,000 a month intend to leave South Africa, largely because confidence in

South Africa's future has fallen. South Africa, largely because confidence in South Africa's future has fallen.

Young people also expressed their frustration and anxiety over uncertain futures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gittings et al., 2021). Young people were uncertain about continuing with their studies or finding or continuing with work whereas learners were concerned about when schools would re-open following school closures from hard lockdowns and the possibility of missing an academic year (Gittings et al., 2021). While those who had lost jobs were understandably concerned about the impact of that loss on their livelihoods and on their families, learners were concerned about their education and their future, as expressed in the following statement by one of the interviewed young persons: "It's very frustrating not to know where your future is going It's very stressful not knowing where your life is heading ... my main concern with my life is about education because I know that if I can educate myself, I can change my situation and do better. Not knowing when school will open is very stressful" (Gittings et al., 2021:951).

Emerging Gaps

Some evident gaps emerged from the reviewed body of literature as presented above. These include the fact that some of the reviewed literature was potentially out-dated and not as accurate in terms of current situations, particularly the post-COVID-19 situation. This stands the current study in good stead to contribute towards addressing that gap. Limited literature, particularly a study focusing on the perception of learners on school leadership matters, is another gap emerging from this review. This observation is also supported by Odhiambo and Hii (2012), who contend that there has indeed been limited research on how teachers, parents and students perceive effective school leadership in practice. It is for that reason that some parts of the review relied on international literature. Again, this provides our current survey a good opportunity to contribute to closing that gap.

Implications

The trends that emerged from the reviewed body of literature have telling implications for the schooling system in South Africa and educational research itself. These trends imply that there is a need for the South African schooling system to provide institutional mental health support for learners, teachers, administrators and other staff members who work with learners. The need for this kind of support is strongly corroborated by some sections of the reviewed pieces of literature (Jansen, 2020; Luthar et al., 2021). The emerging trends also imply the need for South Africa to build a resilient schooling system that will produce resilient young people who will withstand various pandemics of life. Finally, the trends, particularly from older pieces of literature, imply that there is a need for more current studies to be conducted, particularly regarding learners' perceptions of school leadership and their future in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY: TOOLS TO COLLECT INFORMATION ABOUT THE PERCEPTION OF LEARNERS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The research project utilised a case study design, involving the provinces of KwaZulu Natal, Eastern Cape and North-West and Limpopo. A mixed method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, was chosen to triangulate the results and provide a comprehensive understanding. The study employed a two-pronged approach utilising telephone surveys and focus group interviews. One of the findings highlighted in the data is the importance of access to a decent meal through the school nutrition programme. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape, expressed that having food provided at school motivated them to attend. Another significant factor emerging from the data is the excitement learners feel about gaining new knowledge. Learning and acquiring new knowledge were identified as key motivating factors for learners to attend school.

Figure 1: Two-pronged approach used to conduct research



FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

In this research, a comprehensive mixed-methods approach was utilised to investigate South African learners' experiences and perspectives within the education system. Thematic content analysis was employed for the qualitative focus group interviews, while statistical analysis was used for the quantitative survey. 86 learners from four provinces (KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga) were interviewed in the focus group. On the other hand, for the telephonic survey learners from seven provinces were interviewed (North West, Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape, Free State, Gauteng and Eastern Cape). The main findings and themes that emerged from the focus group interviews include the following:

What Learners Like About Their School:

Learners expressed appreciation for humble and friendly teachers, good academic support and performance, discipline, hard work among peers, and the dedication of teachers. They also enjoyed sports and cultural activities.

Qualities of a Good Leader of Learners:

Learners identified qualities such as friendliness, adherence to school rules, creativity, cleanliness, innovation, approachability and excellent listening skills as desirable in a good leader.

actively engaged in shaping leadership by voting and participating in representative councils of learners (RCLs).

Factors That Excite Learners About Attending School:

Learners found motivation in challenging home situations, using education to improve their family's circumstances and the presence of an academic support network at school.

Factors That Discourage Learners from Attending School:

Challenges included emotional abuse, unequal treatment based on academic performance, bullying, cyberbullying, discouragement due to poverty, teacher absenteeism, inadequate psychological support, substance abuse and limited access to extra-mural activities. These issues affected learner motivation and well-being.

Learners' Suggestions for Improving School Excitement:

Learners recommended treating all learners equally and fairly, improving the school feeding scheme, promoting polite and respectful communication with teachers and addressing substance abuse within school premises.

Challenges Resolved by the Representative Council of Learners (RCL):

The RCL played a vital role in resolving issues such as broken toilets and lack of sanitary towels for girls, and improving food provisioning, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Barriers to Maintaining Relationships Between Learners and Teachers: Instances of unfair treatment, dealing with rebellious learners and a lack of effective communication and understanding between teachers and learners strained relationships.

Improving Relationships Between Learners and Teachers: Learners emphasised promoting positive interactions and collaboration, fostering a culture of mutual respect, and encouraging polite and respectful communication as essential steps to create a more positive and supportive learning environment.

Learners' Recommendations to the President: Learners called for job creation for young people using government grants, improved connectivity and provision of computers or tablets, timely scholar transport, appointment of counsellors and psychologists in schools for psychosocial support, and the formal distribution of free sanitary pads, especially in underprivileged schools.

This research, conducted across multiple provinces and with a diverse group of learners, provides valuable insights into the South African education system. Ethical clearance was obtained for the study, and strategies were employed to address challenges encountered during data collection to ensure a comprehensive and robust dataset.

SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

The 1000 Young Voices survey conducted in South Africa aims to assess happiness, optimism and mental health among learners. Recognising the historical racial divisions in the South African education system, the study emphasises the need for a holistic approach that goes beyond academic assessments to understand the complex factors affecting education.

The impact of COVID-19 on education is acknowledged, shifting the focus from traditional classrooms to the home environment, where access to electricity and devices plays a significant role. Parents and guardians emerged as crucial support figures during the pandemic, with generally positive relationships between learners and their parents or guardians.

Notably, the mental health of learners was examined, with 90% reporting feelings of happiness, often linked to improved academic performance, while 41% experienced sadness, often attributed to family-related factors. Access to psychosocial support was limited, with only 9% of learners accessing such services, predominantly through teachers and school-based teams. The findings underscore the interconnected nature of factors shaping learner experiences in South Africa, emphasising the importance of addressing mental health concerns and the role of educators in providing support.

Learner mental health and psychosocial support

The study delves into the holistic factors that shape the lives of South African learners, with a particular focus on their mental health and access to psychosocial support. Encouragingly, 90% of surveyed learners reported feeling happy in the past six months. Academic improvement was a significant source of happiness for 67% of these learners, while other factors contributing to their happiness included general positive feelings (18%), improved household income (10%), and the recovery of a family member or peer from illness (5%). Conversely, 41% of learners experienced sadness during this period, with 45% choosing not to disclose the reason.

Among those who did, 23% cited the loss of a family member as a cause, and 14% mentioned witnessing a family member or peer falling ill. Additionally, 12% of learners felt sadness due to the loss of household income. These figures underscore the diverse array of variables influencing learners' mental health and well-being. However, a concerning finding is

that only 9% of learners had accessed psychosocial support, revealing a significant gap in addressing their mental health needs. Of those who did seek support, 47% turned to teachers and school-based support teams, while 26% consulted psychologists or psychiatrists, and 16% accessed community support networks like a faith-based institution. Addressing the mental health of learners remains a critical challenge, especially considering that many teachers expressed uncertainty about how to tackle this issue.

Learner school experiences

The section on learner experiences of school reveals positive sentiments among South African learners toward their educational journey. An overwhelming 98% of learners acknowledge the importance of completing their matric, indicating a strong commitment to education. In terms of enjoyment, learners rated their school experience positively, with a score of 4.28 out of 5, and their relationships with teachers received an average rating of 4.34, underscoring the significance of teacher-student bonds. The study highlights the multifaceted role of schools in learners' lives, where 34% find joy in face-to-face teaching, 23% appreciate the support from teachers and peers, and 25% value the opportunity to interact with classmates and friends, emphasising schools as socialisation hubs. Moreover, schools serve as sites of psychosocial support, as evident in 67% of learners deriving happiness from improved academic performance.

Other factors contributing to learner happiness include general positive feelings (18%), enhanced household income (10%), and the recovery of family members or peers from illness (5%). Additionally, schools cater to socio-economic needs, with 5% of learners enjoying access to feeding programmes. Sporting activities also play a crucial role, with 12% of learners finding joy in participating in sport. The study underscores that schools provide not only formal education but also contribute significantly to learners' psychosocial well-being, social interactions and the fulfilment of various socio-economic needs, reaffirming the central role of school in learners'

lives. Furthermore, 42% of learners express a preference for technical schools, indicating a diverse range of educational aspirations among South African youth.

School leadership

In the realm of school leadership, the study sheds light on learners' involvement and perceptions. It is noteworthy that a significant majority of learners (77%) are aware of their school leaders, showcasing a general awareness of the existence of student leadership within their schools. However, when it comes to active participation, there is a slight disconnect, with 62% of learners confirming that they voted for their school leaders, leaving 38% who did not exercise their voting rights. A similar trend is observed in participation in representative councils of learners (RCLs), with 60% of learners engaging in these councils, and 40% not. In terms of leadership qualities, learners highly value effective communication (54%) in their leaders, followed by confidence (31%), and a smaller percentage (13%) emphasising the importance of integrity. This data suggests that while many learners are aware of school leadership and participate to some extent, there is room for further engagement and perhaps a deeper understanding of the qualities that make an effective leader in the eyes of South African youth.

Learner futures: national perspective

Learner perspectives on the future of South Africa are marked by a mix of hope, concern and a call for change. Among surveyed learners, 57% expressed negative views about the country's future, 34% held positive perspectives, and 9% displayed apathy. Employment emerged as a central theme in learner messages to the country's president, with 19% of learners emphasising the need for more job opportunities, closely linking

employment to education. Learners recognised the critical role of education as a pathway to employment, with 15% stressing the importance of access to quality education, including adequate resources.

Issues of infrastructure, particularly school resources and load shedding, featured prominently in learner concerns, with 14% mentioning these challenges. Corruption, crime and gender-based violence, comprising 14% of the messages, highlighted broader societal issues affecting learners. Despite challenges, 34% of learners held a positive outlook, emphasising the potential of youth to drive positive change in the country and citing the importance of youth empowerment programmes. This section underscores the significance of learners' faith in their ability to be agents of change.

Learner Codes for Messages to the President

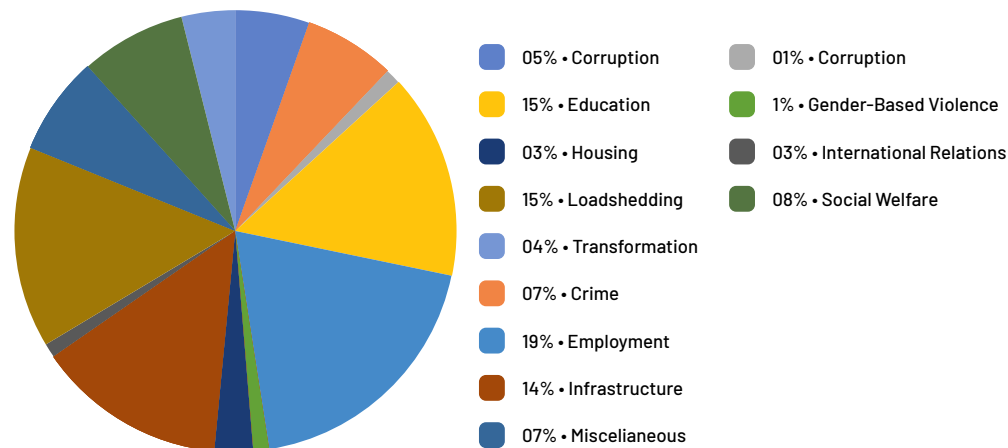
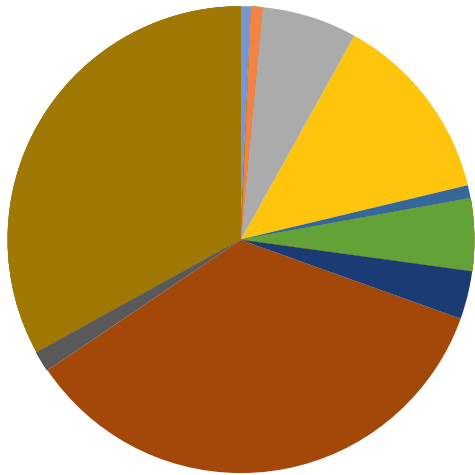


Figure 2: Learner career choices

The survey of South African learners from various provinces revealed key career aspirations and motivations driving their career choices. Six prominent career paths emerged, including doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer, soldier and teacher. Learner motivations for selecting these career paths were diverse and often intertwined. Personal interest was a significant factor, with learners expressing a genuine passion for their chosen fields. Social justice also played a crucial role, with many learners driven by a desire to make a positive impact on society, especially in careers like medicine and law. Some learners combined career-specific interests with social justice goals, such as those aspiring to be soldiers to serve and protect their country. Additionally, financial interest influenced career choices, particularly in the case of accountancy, where the potential for a higher income was a motivating factor. Overall, learners' career aspirations were deeply rooted in their personal values and their aspirations to contribute to society.

driven by a desire to make a positive impact on society, especially in careers like medicine and law. Some learners combined career-specific interests with social justice goals, such as those aspiring to be soldiers to serve and protect their country. Additionally, financial interest influenced career choices, particularly in the case of accountancy, where the potential for a higher income was a motivating factor. Overall, learners' career aspirations were deeply rooted in their personal values and their aspirations to contribute to society.

Motivation for Career Choice



- 01% • Career Specific
- 07% • Career Specific Interest + Personal Interest
- 01% • Career Specific Interest
- 03% • N/A
- 02% • Personal Interest + Social Justice
- 01% • Career Specific Interest + Financial
- 13% • Career Specific Interest + Social Justice
- 05% • Financial Interest
- 35% • Social Welfare
- 33% • Social Justice

Figure 3: Motivation for Career Choice

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The key findings from the combined analysis of both the focus group interview dataset and the telephonic survey dataset reveal critical insights into South African learners' experiences and perspectives. Learners appreciate qualities like the humbleness of some teachers, good academic support, discipline and access to extracurricular activities at their schools.

They emphasise the importance of fair treatment, respect and equal opportunities from school leaders. Factors motivating learners to attend school include challenging home situations, access to meals and the pursuit of knowledge, while bullying, emotional abuse and substance abuse discourage attendance. Learners suggest improving school experiences by addressing inequality, upgrading school feeding programmes, fostering respectful communication and addressing substance abuse issues.

Learners also highlight the need for more psychosocial support and sanitary programmes in schools. Furthermore, the survey data underscores the significance of digital access, positive parent-child relationships and the interconnection between academic performance and mental health. Learners express overall positive sentiments toward school and teachers. They consider matriculation important and advocate for improved support in education. Additionally, they want the president to address unemployment, education, infrastructure, corruption and crime while lowering the voting age to 16. Career aspirations predominantly lean toward professions like doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, soldiers, and teachers, with motivations ranging from personal interests and social justice to financial considerations and career-specific interests.

CONCLUSION

The 1000 young voices survey has provided valuable insights into the well-being, perspectives and agency of learners. It acknowledges that learners are active participants in their education, not passive recipients, and their experiences are shaped by various factors, including access to technology, relationships with parents and guardians, and interactions with teachers and school leadership. The study underscores the importance of mental health support within the school context, highlighting the role of teachers and school-based teams while also emphasising the need for further research and support mechanisms. While learner perspectives on the future are influenced by societal challenges such as unemployment, educational resource disparities, infrastructure issues and crime, they express a strong belief in their capacity to drive positive change in the country. Ultimately, the study recognises the pivotal role of South Africa's youth in shaping a brighter future for the nation.



REFERENCE LIST

Adolesc, J. (2015). Bullying and absenteeism: Information for State and Local Education Agencies. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/health_and_academics/pdf/fs_bullying_absenteeism.pdf. Accessed 12 December 2022.

Albalawi, H. & Nadeem, M. (2022). Exploring the Impact of Ineffective Formal Communication between Teachers and Students: A Case Study of Mustaqbal University and Jubail University College, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1245110.pdf>. Accessed 13 December 2022.

Annu, S. & Sunita, M. (2015). Extracurricular Activities and Student's Performance in Secondary School of Government and Private Schools. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology Research*, 1(1), 53-61.

Assan, J.K., Simon, L., Kharisma, D.D., Adaboh, A.A., Assan, N. & Mamun, A.A. (2020). Assessing the Impact of Public-Private Funded Midday Meal Programs on the Educational Attainment and Well-being of School Children in Uttar Pradesh, India. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, 1(2), 193-214.

Austrian, K., Kangwana, B., Muthengi, E.N. & Sloer-hampejsek, E. (2021). Effects of sanitary pad distribution and reproductive health education on primary school attendance and reproductive health knowledge and attitudes in Kenya: a cluster randomized controlled trial. <https://assets.researchsquare.com/files/rs-105989/v2/f38c572a-015e-475d-b9d6-bf466b6b60a9.pdf?c=1631882405>. Accessed 13 December 2022.

Berg, J. & Scharf, W. (2004). Crime statistics in South Africa 1994-2003. *South African Criminology Journal*, 57-78.
Brammer, M.S. (2020). Student Resilience and COVID-19. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3637824. Accessed 25 September 2022.

Gobena, G.A. (2018). Family Socio-economic Status Effect on Students' Academic Achievement at College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Haramaya University, Eastern Ethiopia. *Journal of Teacher Education and Educators*, 7(3), 207-222.

Goodman, F. R., Disabato, D. J., Kashdan, T. B. & Machell, K. A. (2017). Personality strengths as resilience: A one-year multi-wave study. *Journal of Personality*, 85, 423-434.

Goodyear-Smith, F., Martel, R., Darragh, M., Warren, J., Thabrew, H. and Clark, T.C.2017. Screening for risky behaviour and mental health in young people: the YouthCHAT programme. *Public health reviews*. 38, 1-12.

Harris, K.M., Duncan, G.J. & Boisjoly, J. (2002). Evaluating the role of 'Nothing to lose' attitudes on risky behaviour in adolescence. *Social Forces*, 80, 1005-1039.

Heystek, J. (2022). Leadership in the eye of the beholder: stakeholder's perspectives on principals as leaders improving schools in challenging contexts in South Africa. *School Leadership and Management*, 42(2), 126-150.

Hogan, R., & Judge, T. (2013). Personality and Leadership. In M. G. Rumsey (Ed.). The Oxford Handbook of Leadership. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jansen, J. (2020). Data or bread? A policy analysis of student experiences of learning under lockdown. *Southern African Review of Education: Emergent Educational Imaginaries During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 26(1), 167-181.

Jwan, J.O. & Kisaka, S.T. (2017). Democracy, ethics and social justice: Implications for secondary school leadership in Kenya. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(3), 1-9.

Kamper, G. (2008). A profile of effective leadership in some South African high-poverty schools. *South African Journal of Education*, 28, 1-18.

Kamper, G. & Badenhorst, J. (2010). Facing the Future: The Perceptions of Black Adolescents on their Prospects in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 45(3), 243-257.

Khumalo, S.S. (2019). The role of transformational school leadership in promoting teacher commitment: An antecedent for sustainable development in South Africa. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 10(2):22-32.

Krippendorff, K. (2018). Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology. California: Sage.
Li, X., Gu, Q. & He, W. (2019). Resilience of Chinese teachers and its relationship with perceived working conditions and relational trust. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10069055/3/GU%20Teacher%20resilience%20in%20China%20201902_QG_No%20Track%20Changes.pdf. Accessed 11 December 2022.

Lock, I. & Seele, P. (2015). Quantitative content analysis as a method for business ethics research. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 24, S24-S40.

Luthar, S.S., Pao, L.S. & Kumar, N.L. (2021). Covid-19 and Resilience in Schools. <https://s-rcd.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/sop2.16>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

Mafora, P. (2013). Learners' and teachers' perceptions of principals' leadership in Soweto secondary schools: a social justice analysis. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(3), 1-15.

Maholmes, V. (2014). Fostering resilience and well-being in children and families in poverty: Why hope still matters. New York: Oxford University Press.

McCance-Katz, E.F. (2019). The national survey on drug use and health: 2017. Substance abuse and mental health services administration.

McKenzie, K. (2019). The Effects of Poverty on Academic Achievements. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230212.pdf>. Accessed 12 December 2022.

Mfidi, F.H. (2017). Mental Health Issues of School-Going Adolescents in High Schools in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery*, 19(3), 1-13.

Mfuthwana, T. & Dreyer, L. M. (2018). Establishing inclusive schools: Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education teams. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(4).

Msosa, K.S. (2020). A Comparative Trend Analysis of Changes in Teacher Rate of Absenteeism in South Africa. [file:///C:/Users/Hlengani/Downloads/education-10-00189%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Hlengani/Downloads/education-10-00189%20(1).pdf). Accessed 13 December 2022.

Murahwi, K. & Ntuli, S. (2021). Access to internet connectivity – the rights of learners in the post-COVID-19 era in Africa. [file:///C:/Users/Hlengani/Downloads/JET%20Exchange_Digital%20Rights_Final_WEB%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Hlengani/Downloads/JET%20Exchange_Digital%20Rights_Final_WEB%20(1).pdf). Accessed 13 December 2022.

National Education Collaboration Trust (2022). The NECT COVID- 19 Response Initiative: Report on rapid dialogues with key education stakeholders. Pretoria: NECT.

Odhiambo, G. and Hii, A., 2012. Key stakeholders' perceptions of effective school leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 40(2), 232-247.

Auld, E., Rapplepe, J. and Morris, P. (2019). PISA for Development: How the OECD and World Bank shaped education governance post-2015. *Comparative Education*, 55(2), 197-219.

Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2021). DBE Response to SAHRC on Inclusive Education, Persons with Disabilities, Mental Health. <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/29795/>. Accessed 29 October 2022.

Rapper, R., Brown, C. & Llewelyn, A. (2021). Student Support as social network: exploring non-traditional student experiences of academic and well-being support during the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2021.1965960>, Accessed 11 December 2022.

Reddy, P., Resnicow, K., Omandien, R. & Kambaran, N. (2007). Prevalence and Correlates of Substance Use Among High School Students in South Africa and the United States. *Research and Practice*, 97(10), 1859-1864.

Rourke, L. & Anderson, T. (2004). Validity in quantitative content analysis. *Educational technology research and development*, 52(1), 5-18.

Schulte-Korne, G. (2016). Mental health problems in a school setting: in children and adolescents. *Dtsch Arztebl Int.*, 113(11), 183-190.

Shaked, H. (2019). School leaders' contribution to social justice: A review. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 28(3), 303-316.

Soland, J., Kuhfeld, M., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E. & Liu, J. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student achievement and what it may mean for educators. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/05/27/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-achievement-and-what-it-may-mean-for-educators/>. Accessed 31 October 2022.

South African Human Rights Commission (2019). Report of the National Investigative Hearing into the Status of Mental Health Care in South Africa. <https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/SAHRC%20Mental%20Health%20Report%20Final%2025032019.pdf>. Accessed 31 October 2022.

Spaull, N. & Van der Berg, S. (2020). Counting the cost: COVID-19 school closures in South Africa and its impact on children. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, online, 2223-7682.

StatsSA (Statistics South Africa) (2022). Profiling health challenges: faced by adolescents (10-19 years) in South Africa. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/03-09-15/03-09-152022.pdf>. Accessed 29 October 2022.

StatsSA (Statistics South Africa) (2022). South Africa's youth continues to bear the burden of unemployment. <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15407>. Accessed 16 August 2023.

Steyn, M., Badenhorst, J. & Kamler, G. (2010). Our voice counts: adolescents' view on their future in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 30, 166-188.

Sukhamit, K., Suttipong, H. & Songsak, P. (2013). The Contemplative Education Learning Environment Management Model for Undergraduate Students. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/09b670899a8f9b724fd35b859e9-baf1a/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=406316>. Accessed 11 December 2022.

Taylor, N., Deacon, R. & Robinson, N. (2019). Secondary Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Teacher Preparation Support. Overview Report. <https://www.jet.org.za/resources/secondary-level-teacher-education-overview-report.pdf/view>. Accessed 13 December 2022.

Theron, L. C. (2016). Towards a culturally- and contextually-sensitive understanding of resilience: Privileging the voices of black, South African young people. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 31, 635-670.

Theron, L. C. (2017). Adolescent Versus Adult Explanations of Resilience Enablers: A South African Study. *Youth and Society*, 52(1), 78-98.

Ugwu, A.C. & Ozoemena, L.C. (2019). A Critical Analysis of Ethical Issues in Students-Teachers Relationship in Nigeria. <https://nigerianjournalsonline.com/index.php/najp/article/viewFile/122/117>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2002). SCHOOLS: school-based education for drug abuse prevention. https://www.unodc.org/pdf/youthnet/handbook_school_english.pdf. Accessed 13 December 2022.

Wang, X. & Lo, L.N.K. (2021). Development of resilience among Chinese rural teachers: a social-ecological perspective. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062743>. Accessed 12 December 2021.

White, M. D. & Marsh, E. E. (2006). Content analysis: A flexible methodology. *Library trends*, 55(1), 22-45.

Woods, P.A. (2005). Democratic leadership in education. London: Paul Chapman Publishing. World Health Organization, 2018. WHO recommendations on intrapartum care for a positive childbirth experience. World Health Organization. World Health Organization (2021). Mental health in schools: a manual. <https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/9789290225652-eng.pdf>. Accessed 29 October 2022.

10
Years



+27 12 752 6200 info@nect.org.za www.nect.org.za
G Floor, Block D, Lakefield Office Park 272, West Ave, Centurion